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Ethnicity and Citizen Satisfaction: A Study on Local Public Administration

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Abstract

Purpose - The main theme is to investigate whether various ethnic groups report different levels of customer satisfaction regarding the communication process within local public administration. **Design/methodology/approach** - The approach is survey research based on questionnaire used to assess the communication process within city halls and county councils from Crisana Region. Data from a representative sample were analyzed. **Findings-Research results** show that there is a significant difference between citizens perceptions and expectations regarding the communication process within city halls and county councils. By analyzing data it was possible to determine citizen satisfaction and to assess the relationship with specific different ethnic features. The results illustrate that on the responsiveness dimension of communication quality, satisfaction is significantly affected by the respondents' belonging to an ethnic group. **Research limitations/implications** - This study focused only on local public administration within Western Romania. Generalisability of results to other servicescapes in public sector remains to be tested. Therefore, further research should investigate the local public communication in other regions with different ethnic groups. **Practical implications** – In public policy making local public sector managers should recognize the importance of ethnic characteristics and grant weight to ethnic features of the community members they serve. **Originality/value**- The characteristics of ethnic groups received somewhat less attention from the academic researchers, there is a paucity of academic papers in this area, it has been neglected the relationship among ethnicity, service quality, and customer satisfaction in public sector. This has been identified as a need in the literature. Therefore, this paper presents a framework for evaluating local public communication within multi-ethnic communities.

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1. Introduction

In our globalized world ethnic contention is a primarily source of conflict, instability and state failure (Jackson, Lyon, 2002, p.563).

Serb (2007, p.135) stated that ethnicity summarizes national cultural qualities besides the race leading to the identification of distinct groups in relation to others. In some situations ethnicity is synonymous with belonging to a national group.

Kundnami (2001, p.108) notes that in England a new class of 'ethnic representatives' entered the town halls from the mid 1980s onwards, who would be the surrogate voice for their own ethnically-defined fiefdoms. They entered into a pact with the authorities, for the best interest of the community. Parekh (2000, p.341) has suggested that it is possible to develop a political structure of multicultural and multi-ethnic society based on a strong sense of unity but also ingrained respect for diversity.

In Roumania the existent ethnic groups are relatively low compared to the majority group, but there some communities where the minority groups are more numerous than Romanian population.

In heterogeneous communities local public authorities have to adapt the services delivery characteristics to the multi- cultural and multi- ethnic populations in order to exist a good representation of all the community's members. The complexities of becoming involved in ethnically charged communities may prevent repeating past mistakes in the future interventions (Jackson, Lyon, 2002, p.580).

Unfortunately there are few studies that analyze the communication within public administration (Pandey, Garnett, 2006, Garnett et.al. 2008) and the factors that influence citizen satisfaction regarding the communication process within local authorities. About communication effective measures in local public administration written Melkers, Willoughby (2005).

This research is built upon work by Webb and Marshall (1995) which demonstrated that race/ethnicity is the single most important factor in predicting attitudes towards police. Accordingly, in banking services, Snow et. al. (1996) showed that Canadian retail bank costumers of different ethnicities had different service perceptions. Brown and Benedict (2002) summarized the findings of over 100 articles on public perceptions and attitudes towards the police and found that ethnicity is one most important predictors of satisfaction.

Despite the extensive discussions of politicians on TV, the international literature regarding specific of the communication process within heterogeneous ethnic communities is still insufficient.

A well planed communication design can be the solution to surpass communication difficulties even if we take into consideration the features of the communication process within public sector, cultural barriers, ethnic, linguistic or other barriers.

2. Methods of measuring the quality of public services

There are several methods of measuring service quality and among the most representative ones we can mention the following: SERVQUAL (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Barry, 1988); SERVPERF (Cronin and Taylor, 1992), EP (Teas, 1993), SITEQUAL (You and Donthu, 2001), Webqual/eQUAL (Barnes and Vidgen, 2005), EtailQ (Wolfenbarger and Gilly, 2003), EWAM (Schubert, 2003), e-SERVQUAL (Zeithaml, Parasuraman, Malhotra, 2002), ES- QUAL (Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V.A., Malhotra, 2005), WebQEM (Olsina, Rossi, 2002).

SERVQUAL method was the first developed and applied in evaluating service quality and has been the subject of a large number of experiments reported in specialist publications. Also, the method was applied and experienced in services. Should be noted that all other methods have been developed based on SERVQUAL conceptual architecture.

Despite considerable work undertaken in this research stream, there is no consensus as to which of the measurement scales is best suited to measure service quality (Morrison, 2004).

3. Applying the SERVQUAL method to local public authorities

To Establish requirements for quality of local public communication depending on the area covered by the public service required adaption of the five SERVQUAL dimensions items. The developed survey instrument was piloted on a group of citizens comprised of 37 women and 25 men over the age of 18. Based on this feedback, some measures were rephrased for clarity.

In order to collect data a cross-sectional survey design was used. Interviews were conducted from 9 am to 8 pm Monday through Friday, 9 am to 8 pm on Saturday, and from 8 am to 6 pm on Sunday.

For data collection cluster sampling was used. For this study, the analyzed population is the people who live in the Crișana region. From the geographic point of view, Crișana region is a defined area by Crasna river at north, Cris White river to the south, Plopișului and Bihor Mountains to the east and by the west border of Romania with Hungary (Ioan Godea, 1980, p. 122).

The sample size is the number of questionnaires needed to have representation in the total population. For the estimation considered to enroll in a range of $\pm 5\%$ of the true proportion, the sample was 380 people. Data collection period was between 2 and 20 March 2013. To test the validity of the questionnaire were calculated Cronbach alpha coefficients.

Table 1. Cronbach alpha Coefficients

The communication dimensions in local administration	Expectations	Perceptions
Tangibility	0,811	0,761
Reliability	0,759	0,831
Responsiveness	0,727	0,862
Assurance	0,823	0,905
Empathy	0,765	0,889

Source: Made by author

The acceptance of this paper satisfaction represents the gap between citizens' perceptions regarding local public communication and their expectations on this concern. The SERVQUAL score is:

SERVQUAL Score= Score Perceptions – Score Expectations.

The SERVQUAL score is negative, there is a significant negative difference between perceptions and expectations regarding marketing communications from local government institutions. In Crisana region, this result indicates an ineffective communication from the local authorities.

Table 2. Test of Homogeneity of Variances

	Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
Tperceptions_expectations	1.413	2	375	.245
Fperceptions_expectations	.769	2	375	.464
Rperceptions_expectations	.221	2	375	.802
Sperceptions_expectations	.107	2	375	.898
Eperceptions_expectations	.148	2	375	.863

Source: Processed by author

H1: There are significant differences on the five dimensions of citizens' satisfaction (tangibility, reliability,

responsiveness, assurance and empathy) on the communication of local public administration depending on the citizens' ethnic characteristics.

In order to verify the research hypotheses was calculated the One Way ANOVA statistical tests. After testing the homogeneity of variances it can be concluded that for all five dimensions (tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy) the Sig. value (Levene test) is more than 0,05, and this shows that it can accomplish the ANOVA testing.

Table 3. ANOVA Test

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Tperceptions_expectations	Between Groups	5.083	4	1.271	1.695	.150
	Within Groups	281.113	375	.750		
	Total	286.197	379			
Fperceptions_expectations	Between Groups	1.967	4	.492	.664	.618
	Within Groups	277.809	375	.741		
	Total	279.775	379			
Rperceptions_expectations	Between Groups	11.490	4	2.872	4.340	.002
	Within Groups	248.187	375	.662		
	Total	259.676	379			
Sperceptions_expectations	Between Groups	3.858	4	.964	.907	.460
	Within Groups	398.766	375	1.063		
	Total	402.623	379			
Eperceptions_expectations	Between Groups	18.799	4	4.700	.793	.531
	Within Groups	2223.882	375	5.930		
	Total	2242.682	379			

Source: Processed by author

H1.a. There are significant differences on the tangibility dimension of citizens' satisfaction regarding the communication of local public administration depending on the citizens' ethnic characteristics.

The results of the testing (Table 3) reveal that the F value of 1,695 is not statistically significant because Sig ($p=0,150$) is more than 0,05 and it shows that the mean differences on the tangibility dimension of citizens' satisfaction regarding communication of local government there are no significant differences by the citizens' ethnicity, therefore the research hypothesis H1.a. is rejected.

H1.b. There are significant differences on the reliability dimension of citizens' satisfaction regarding the communication of local public administration depending on the citizens' ethnic characteristics.

The results of the testing (Table 3) reveal that the F value of 0,664 is not statistically significant because Sig ($p=0,618$) is more than 0,05 and it shows that the mean differences on the reliability dimension of citizens' satisfaction regarding communication of local government there are no significant differences by the citizens' ethnicity, therefore the research hypothesis H1.b. is rejected.

H1.c. There are significant differences on the responsiveness dimension of citizens' satisfaction regarding the communication of local public administration depending on the citizens' ethnic characteristics.

The results of the testing (Table 3) reveal that the F value of 4,340 is statistically significant because Sig ($p=0,002$) is less than 0,05 and it shows that the mean differences on the responsiveness dimension of citizens' satisfaction regarding communication of local government there are significant differences by the citizens'

ethnicity, therefore the research hypothesis H1.c. is confirmed, there are significant differences on the responsiveness dimension of citizens' satisfaction regarding the communication of local public administration depending on the citizens' ethnic characteristics.

H1.d. There are significant differences on the assurance dimension of citizens' satisfaction regarding the communication of local public administration depending on the citizens' ethnic characteristics.

The results of the testing (Table 3) reveal that the F value of 0,907 is not statistically significant because Sig ($p=0,460$) is more than 0,05 and it shows that the mean differences on the assurance dimension of citizens' satisfaction regarding communication of local government there are no significant differences by the citizens' ethnicity, therefore the research hypothesis H1.d. is rejected.

H1.e. There are significant differences on the empathy dimension of citizens' satisfaction regarding the communication of local public administration depending on the citizens' ethnic characteristics.

The results of the testing (Table 3) reveal that the F value of 0,793 is not statistically significant because Sig ($p=0,531$) is more than 0,05 and it shows that the mean differences on the empathy dimension of citizens' satisfaction regarding communication of local government there are no significant differences by the citizens' ethnicity, therefore the research hypothesis H1.e. is rejected.

H2. There is a statistically significant negative correlation between the citizens' ethnicity and their satisfaction regarding marketing communications from local government institutions.

In order to verify the second research hypothesis was calculated the Spearman coefficient (Table 4).

Table 4. Correlation between citizens' ethnicity and their satisfaction regarding local public communication

		GAP_Perceptions_Expectations	Ethnicity
Spearman's rho	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	-.040
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.431
	N	380	380
	Correlation Coefficient	-.040	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.431	.
	N	380	380

Source: Processed by author

As is evident from Table 4 there is a very weak negative relationship between citizens' ethnicity and their satisfaction regarding the marketing communications from local government institutions ($r = -0,040$), it is not statistically significant because the p value is 0,431 and is more than 0,05. This hypothesis was rejected because the Spearman coefficient of survey data revealed no statistically significant correlation in satisfaction levels for the existent ethnic groups at the 0.05 level.

4. Conclusions

To explore citizens' perspective in evaluating local public communication it was taken into consideration the ethnicity of the population. The analyzed region (Crisana) is composed of a population which contains more nationalities: Romanians, Hungarians, Roma, Germans and Swabians.

The research based on the five dimensions of service quality that Parasuraman et al. identified in 1988 was very useful in order to determine if there are significant differences on the tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy dimensions of citizens' satisfaction depending on the citizens' ethnic characteristics.

The research hypothesis H1 is partially confirmed; there are statistically significant differences on the responsiveness dimension of citizens' satisfaction regarding communication of local government depending on

the citizens' ethnicity. The second hypothesis was rejected because the Spearman coefficient revealed no statistically significant correlation in satisfaction levels for the existent ethnic groups at the 0.05 level.

Although research results show no significant correlation in satisfaction levels among the region's different ethnic groups, on the responsiveness dimension, where it was introduced a new created item: *The public servants of the local government (which have contact with the public) know the language of the Hungarian minority*, research results showed significant difference in satisfaction levels among the region's different ethnic groups.

Based on information provided by this research, local public institutions managers and academics will have enhanced knowledge of the influence of citizens' ethnicity on the citizens' perception of satisfaction.

Through effective communication with local community members, the local public authority can be positioned closer to citizens, can satisfy citizens' informational needs may even prevent repeating past mistakes in future relations.

Two limitations must be acknowledged that suggest caution in generalizability of current findings. First, this study focused only on local public administration within Western Romania, therefore generalisability of results to other servicescapes in public sector remains to be tested. Second, although the total sample size was 380, after disaggregation into the ethnic categories, a few of the subgroups (German, Swabians and Slovak minority) were exceedingly small in number.

Future studies could utilize larger sample sizes to increase the reliability of the results. Further research should explore whether these findings from Crisana local government are generally characteristics for local public authorities where the Hungarian minority is dominant at a rate of approx. 20-25% of the total population and where the Roma people are the next largest minority in the region.

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